NPS Form 10-900
(3-82)

OMB No. 1024-0018
Expires 10-31-87

NR

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Inventory—Nomination Form

For NPS use only

received

date entered

See instructions in *How to Complete National Register Forms*
Type all entries—complete applicable sections

1. Name

historic Low Memorial Library, Columbia

and/or common

2. Location

street & number West 116th St. between Broadway and Amsterdam Avenue ___ not for publication

city, town New York City ___ vicinity of

state New York code county New York code

3. Classification

Category	Ownership	Status	Present Use	
___ district	___ public	X occupied	___ agriculture	___ museum
X building(s)	X private	___ unoccupied	___ commercial	___ park
___ structure	___ both	___ work in progress	X educational	___ private residence
___ site	**Public Acquisition**	**Accessible**	___ entertainment	___ religious
___ object	___ in process	X yes: restricted	___ government	___ scientific
	___ being considered	___ yes: unrestricted	___ industrial	___ transportation
		___ no	___ military	___ other:

4. Owner of Property

name Trustees of Columbia University

street & number

city, town New York City ___ vicinity of state New York

5. Location of Legal Description

courthouse, registry of deeds, etc. New York City Register

street & number Surrogate's Court 31 Chambers Street

city, town New York City state New York

6. Representation in Existing Surveys

title New York City Landmarks Commission has this property been determined eligible? ___ yes ___ no

date September 20, 1966 ___ federal ___ state X county X local

depository for survey records 20 Vesey Street

city, town New York City state New York

7. Description

Condition		Check one	Check one
_x_ excellent	___ deteriorated	___ unaltered	_x_ original site
___ good	___ ruins	_x_ altered	___ moved date _____
___ fair	___ unexposed		

Describe the present and original (if known) physical appearance

The detailed building description is excerpted from Rachel Carley's report compiled for the New York City Landmark Commission.

Columbia College was chartered by George II in 1754 as King's College. The university was moved from Madison Avenue and 49th Street in 1897 to Morningside Heights and the Low Library was the first major building erected on the present university site. The plan for the design of the first structures was the work of Charles Follen McKim of McKim, Mead and White.

Modeled after the Pantheon in Rome, Low Library was conceived as the visual and academic focal point of the campus plan, housing both administrative offices and the college libraries. Designed on a Greek cross plan, the Library is composed of a central, octagonal hall with upper galleries, ambulatory, four corner staircases, and the four projecting arms of the cross. The great hall served originally as the library's principal reading room, and was modeled after the main reading room of the British Museum in London. The room contained side, corner, and central bookcases for 12,000 volumes, and was dominated by a circular arrangement of tiered desks fitted with bronze reading lamps. These desks surrounded a central reference desk bordered by four columns. An elaborate iron configuration rested on the column capitals, supporting a central, fourfaced clock crowned by a bronze eagle. A white sphere was suspended from the center of the domed ceiling, designed to produce the effect of a luminous moon, by reflecting light from lamps situated in the galleries. A stack room beneath the reading room housed 150,000 volumes while the galleries above shelved an additional 16,000 books. At full capacity the library was expected to accommodate 1.9 million volumes. However, the large central space never really worked as a library reading room. The library was much more successful as a ceremonial space and administrative offices and since 1934, this civic monument has been used for exhibitions, convocations, and a reception area. King George VI of England, Winston Churchill, and Queen Juliana of the Netherlands were all welcomed here.

Centrally located on the main axis of the campus, the Low building is the symbolic center of Columbia University. It is separated from the street by several flights of steps, two landings, and a wide landscaped esplanade. Midway up the stairs is the seated statue of Alma Mater by Daniel Chester French. Here, weather permiting, graduation ceremonies are held with the classic Beaux-arts Low Memorial as a backdrop.

The plan is a Greek cross with a saucer-shaped dome set on an octagonal shaped drum containing large lunette windows. The portico is set on a raised base and contains 10 colossal Ionic columns supporting a simple cornice and a high attic story. There is an inscription in Roman letters over the portico commemorating the founding of the school but there is very little other exterior decoration. Also carefully planned in the best Classical tradition are the ancillary buildings: St. Paul's Chapel, Earl Hall, and the Avery Library.

The interior of the Low Memorial has the same classical monumentality as the exterior. The entrance doors are of bronze and glass, and at the east and west ends of the foyer, four pairs of marble stairs lead to corner offices, originally the President's and Trustees' rooms. The wood and stone detailing of walls, doors, and ceiling is Roman. The upper floors around the central space are now offices of the administration.

It is the central hall that is the glory of Low Memorial. The eight-sided room, in essence a square with bevelled corners, measures 73 feet across and is crowned by an imposing dome, 105-1/2 feet high. This inner dome, painted sky blue, is constructed of plaster over a steel mesh frame and rests on pendentives that spring from four massive limestone corner piers. The piers, actually hollow ducts, partially support large vaults that arch over each of four semicircular clerestory windows. The sixteen granite columns that border the room support four stone galleries or balconies that originally housed library books. Two levels of oak shelving are still intact in each gallery. The gallery fronts, designed as entablatures for the supporting columns, are ornamented with classical wreaths and crowned by a decorative crossbar railing. Mounted on pedestals over each column on the north side of the main hall are the freestanding statues of Euripides, Demosthenes, Sophocles, and Augustus Caesar. The inscriptions "law", "philosophy", "theology", and "medicine", mark the entablatures of the corner piers.

The Low Memorial is one of the most important Classical structures in America and is one of McKim's masterpieces.

8. Significance

National

Period	Areas of Significance—Check and justify below				
___ prehistoric	___ archeology-prehistoric	___ community planning	___ landscape architecture	___ religion	
___ 1400–1499	___ archeology-historic	___ conservation	___ law	___ science	
___ 1500–1599	___ agriculture	___ economics	___ literature	___ sculpture	
___ 1600–1699	X architecture	___ education	___ military	___ social/ humanitarian	
___ 1700–1799	___ art	___ engineering	___ music	___ theater	
X 1800–1899	___ commerce	___ exploration/settlement	___ philosophy	___ transportation	
___ 1900–	___ communications	___ industry	___ politics/government	___ other (specify)	
		___ invention			

Specific dates 1895–1897 **Builder/Architect** Charles Follen McKim / McKim, Mead & White

Statement of Significance (in one paragraph)

Columbia University has long occupied a central place in the architectural life of America, its campus design by McKim, Mead and White is today recognized as a classic of Beaux -- Arts planning principles, and its centerpiece, the majestic Low Memorial Library-is appreciated as a masterwork of its architect, Charles Follen McKim. Today it is the administrative center of the University as it was when Columbia moved from mid-town Manhattan to Morningside Heights, then called the "Acropolis" because of the collection of centers of learning and religion. Neighbors of the University on the Heights are the Jewish Theological Seminary, Union Theological Seminary, Barnard College, Teachers College, Cathedral of St. John the Divine, International House, Riverside Church, Juilliard School of Music, Corpus Christi Catholic Church, St. Luke's Hospital, and others. New York State's oldest institution of higher learning, Columbia, was started in the vestry room of the new schoolhouse adjoining Trinity Church, on lower Broadway, in 1754. Columbia is still on Broadway -- this time from 114th Street to 122nd Street. This is Columbia's fourth home. The first was at Trinity Church (1754-1760), the second at Park Place (17601857), and the third at Madison Avenue and 49th Street (1857-1870).

Columbia produced many of our country's early leaders, such as Alexander Hamilton, John Jay, DeWitt Clinton, Gouverneur Morris, Robert Livingston, and John Randolph "of Roanoke." The University has had a close relationship with three presidents of the United States: Theodore Roosevelt and Franklin D. Roosevelt were students, and General Dwight D. Eisenhower was president of Columbia from 1948 to 1953. When it was opened as King's College in 1754, Columbia had eight students and one faculty member (President Samuel Johnson). The University now has an annual enrollment of about 25,000 students and a faculty of 3,500.

When the original mid-town college moved to the open farm area of the Heights, the fields were occupied by asylums and hospitals. In a move to protect the Hudson River Shore, plans for a Riverside Park and Drive were approved in 1867. A wide boulevard was designed running from 59th to 155th Streets -- renamed Broadway in 1899. The completed Park and Drive designed by Frederick Law Olmsted was finished in 1898, and with transit and subway service, the upper West Side was established.

The first major building of Columbia's new campus was the Low Memorial Library built in 1895-1897. Funds for the library were donated by Seth Low (1850-1916) in honor of his father Abiel Abbot Low (1811-1893), a wealthy importer in the China trade. Seth Low was a Columbia graduate in 1870 and was also President of the University between 1890 and 1901, one of the youngest in the University's history.

Active in politics, Seth Low was elected Mayor of Brooklyn and subsequently became Mayor of New York as the anti-Tammany candidate. During his tenure at Columbia, Low brought Teacher's College, Barnard, and the College of Physicians and Surgeons into the University and began the building program for the new campus.

In 1892, architects Charles McKim, Richard Morris Hunt, and Charles C. Haight, were asked to form a committee to study the new site and recommend a plan for the campus design. Hunt proposed a complex that looked west toward the Palisades, while Haight advocated an eastern orientation. McKim, however, envisioned the University as a self-contained community set on a hill looking south to the city of New York. In the end, elements from the plans of all three architects were combined in the final scheme by McKim, who was appointed campus architect.

The firm of McKim, Mead & White was one of the most famous and productive in the history of American architecture, and played a leading role in promoting classically inspired styles in America during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The remarkable success and influence of this firm has been noted by both critics and admirers:

> The use of such classicism for civic, public, commercial, residential buildings spread until by the time of Mead's death in 1928, there was virtually no village or town in the U.S. that could not boast a bank or courthouse in some variant of the classic theme. During the early years of the twentieth century the influence of the firm extended even to England .... [1]

The firm's national reputation and influence are mostly attributable to the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893 in Chicago. This exhibition, known as the "Great White City", presented America with a vision of the neo-classical city composed of monumental buildings designed by such important architects as McKim, Hunt, and Louis Sullivan. It ushered in a new era in American urban planning known as the "City Beautiful Movement" and it assured the prominence of neo-classicism in American architecture for many years.

Columbia's Trustees must have been deeply impressed by the Beaux Arts buildings in Chicago for they adopted McKim's grand scheme: the domed, majestic temple placed in a setting of unified but varied classical palaces with a Daniel Chester French sculpture in the center, similar to The Republic at the Fair. There was enough enthusiasm for the plan that a full flight of steps was endorsed with fountains, urns, flagpoles, and bronze candelabra which cost almost half the amount of Low Library itself.

The finish on the building is superb. The materials are fine and the craftsmanship first class. Although the building now appears rather somber, it was much less so at the time of its construction. There were extensive flower beds, fountains played, and inside the Rotunda one can still see the residue of a Pompeian color scheme derived from Durand. Ultimately, the Low Memorial was most successful in projecting the image of its donor, Seth Low, as a generous, responsible civic leader with the intelligence to employ a "modern" architect. As a result the Library and campus acquired an independent identity as a symbol which it retains today. It is one of America's finest Pantheons.

---

[1] Roth, Leland M. McKim, Mead and White, Architects. Harper and Row, New York, 1984 p. 382.

9. Major Bibliographical References

See Continuation Sheets

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of nominated property less than an acre

Quadrangle name Central Park **Quadrangle scale** 1:24,000

UTM References

	Zone	Easting	Northing
A	18	587520	457700
B			
C			
D			
E			
F			
G			
H			

Verbal boundary description and justification

See Continuation Sheet

List all states and counties for properties overlapping state or county boundaries

state	code	county	code
state	code	county	code

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Carolyn Pitts, Historian

organization History Division, National Park Service **date** October 1965

street & number 1100 L Street, N.W. Rm 4209 **telephone** (202) 343-8172

city or town Washington **state** DC

12. State Historic Preservation Officer Certification

The evaluated significance of this property within the state is:

___ national ___ state ___ local

As the designated State Historic Preservation Officer for the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (Public Law 89-665), I hereby nominate this property for inclusion in the National Register and certify that it has been evaluated according to the criteria and procedures set forth by the National Park Service.

State Historic Preservation Officer signature

title **date**

For NPS use only

I hereby certify that this property is included in the National Register

date

Keeper of the National Register

Attest: **date**

Chief of Registration

GPO 911-399

Bibliography

American Architect, Vol. CII, No. 1926, November 20, 1912, p. 185 et. seq.

Architectural Record, "Horizontal Curves in Columbia University," v. 9, pp. 82-93, July-September 1899.

Architectural Record, "St. Paul's Chapel," v. XXI, February 1907, pp. 83-95.

Architectural Record, "The Avery Library," v. 33, 1913, pp. 535-549. 1913.

Columbia University: Dedication of the New Site, Columbia University Press, New York, 1896.

Goldstone, Harmon H. and Dalrymple, Martha. History Preserved: A Guide to New York City Landmarks and Historic Districts. Simon and Schuster, New York, 1974.

Hill, Frederick P. Charles F. McKim: The Man, Marshall Jones Co., Francestown, New Hampshire, 1950.

Passanti, Francesco. "The Design of Columbia in the 1890's, McKim and His Client." Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians. May 1977. Vol. XXXVI, No. 2. pp. 69-78.

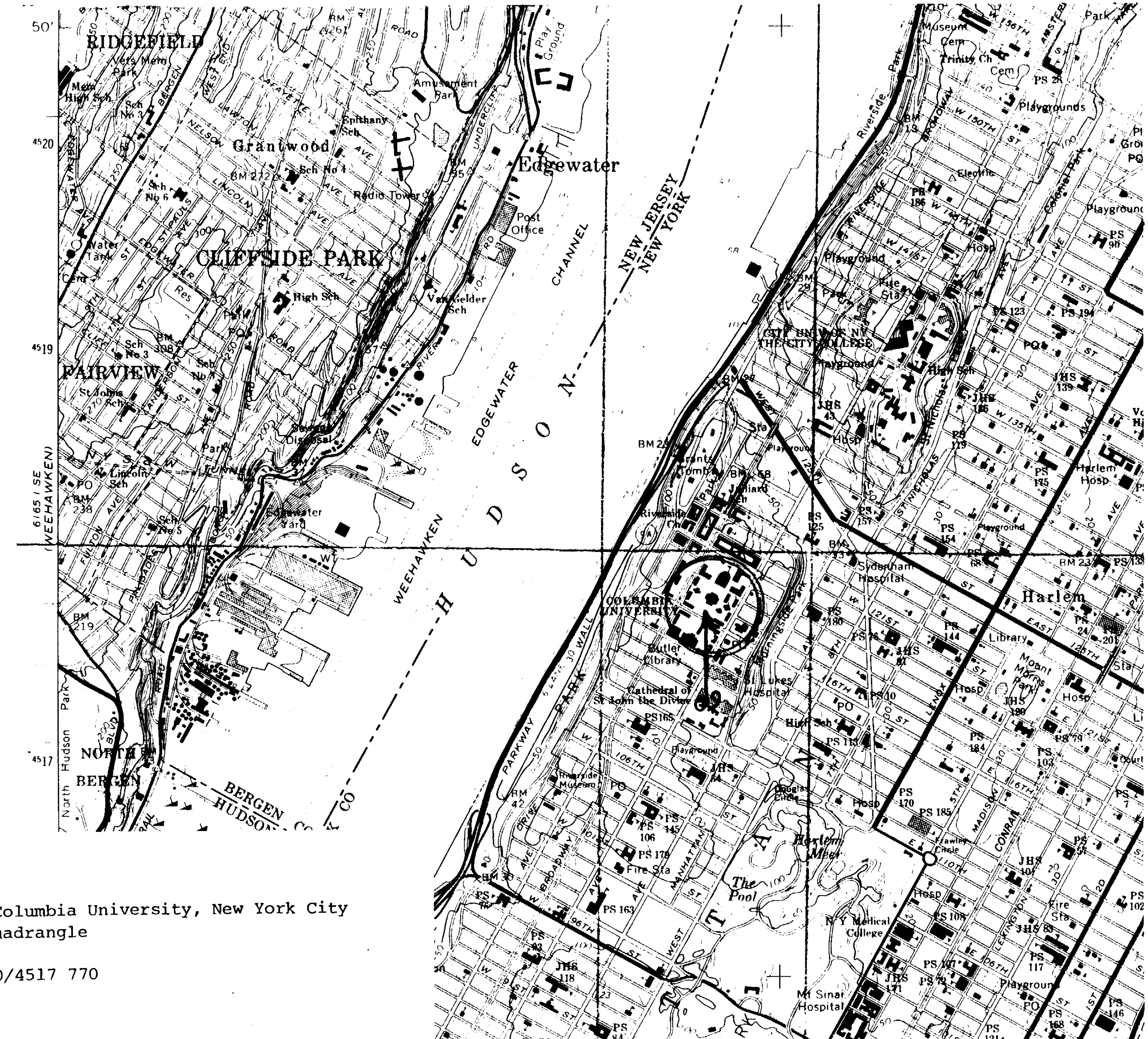
Roth, Leland M. McKim, Mead and White, Architects, Harper and Row, New York, 1984.

Wilson, Richard Guy McKim, Mead and White, Architects, Rizzoli International, New York, 1984.

Verbal Boundary

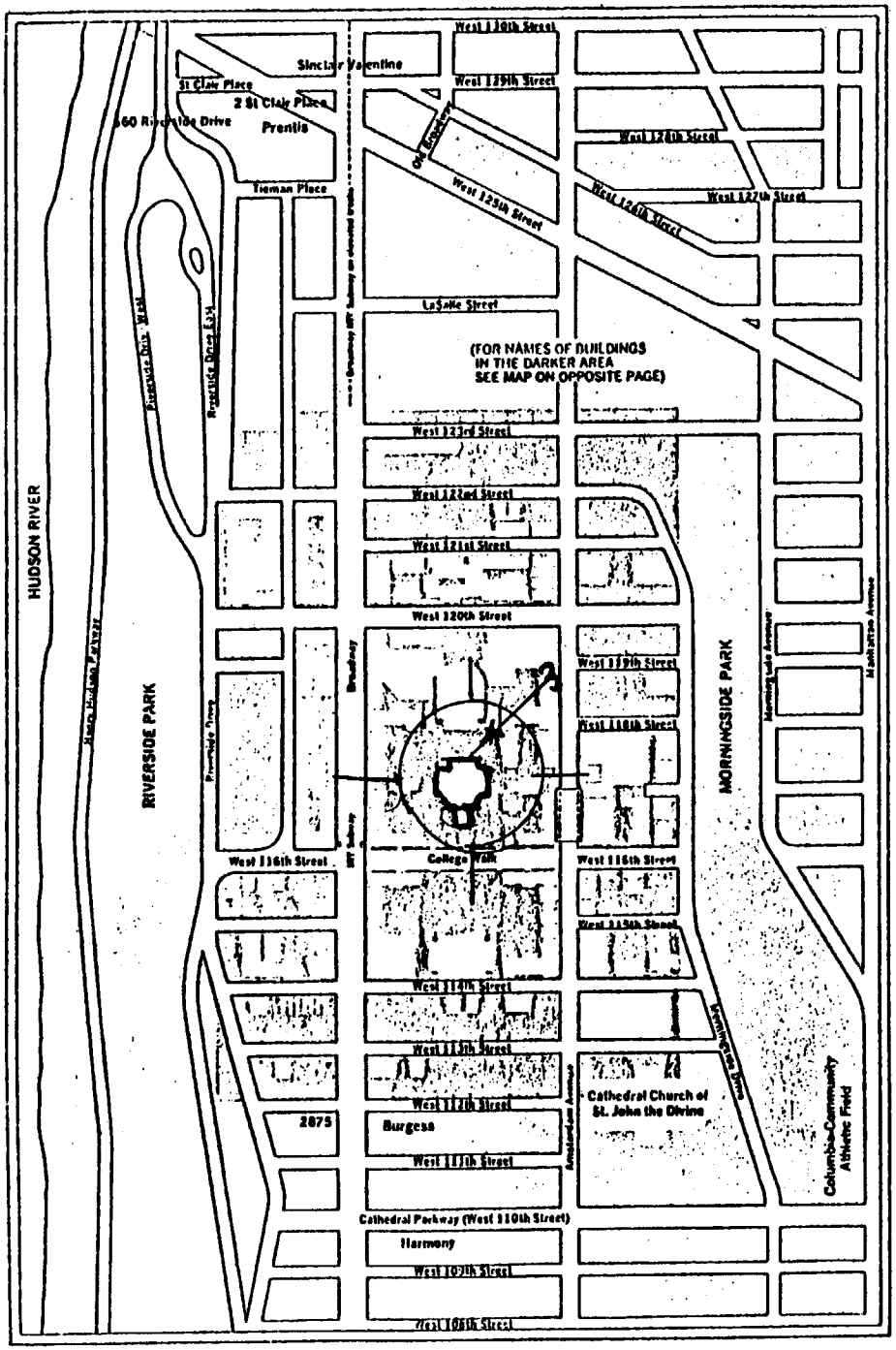
Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1973, Lot 1 in part, consisting of the land on which the described building is situated.

Beginning in the Northeast corner, in a rectangular figure, the boundary runs 272 feet on the east flank, from the Southeast corner, 224 feet along the south flank to the Southwest corner, 272 feet along the west flank to the Northwest corner, and 224 feet along the north flank to the beginning. The boundary encompasses only the described building and is at all points 12 feet from the base of the ground level of the building.

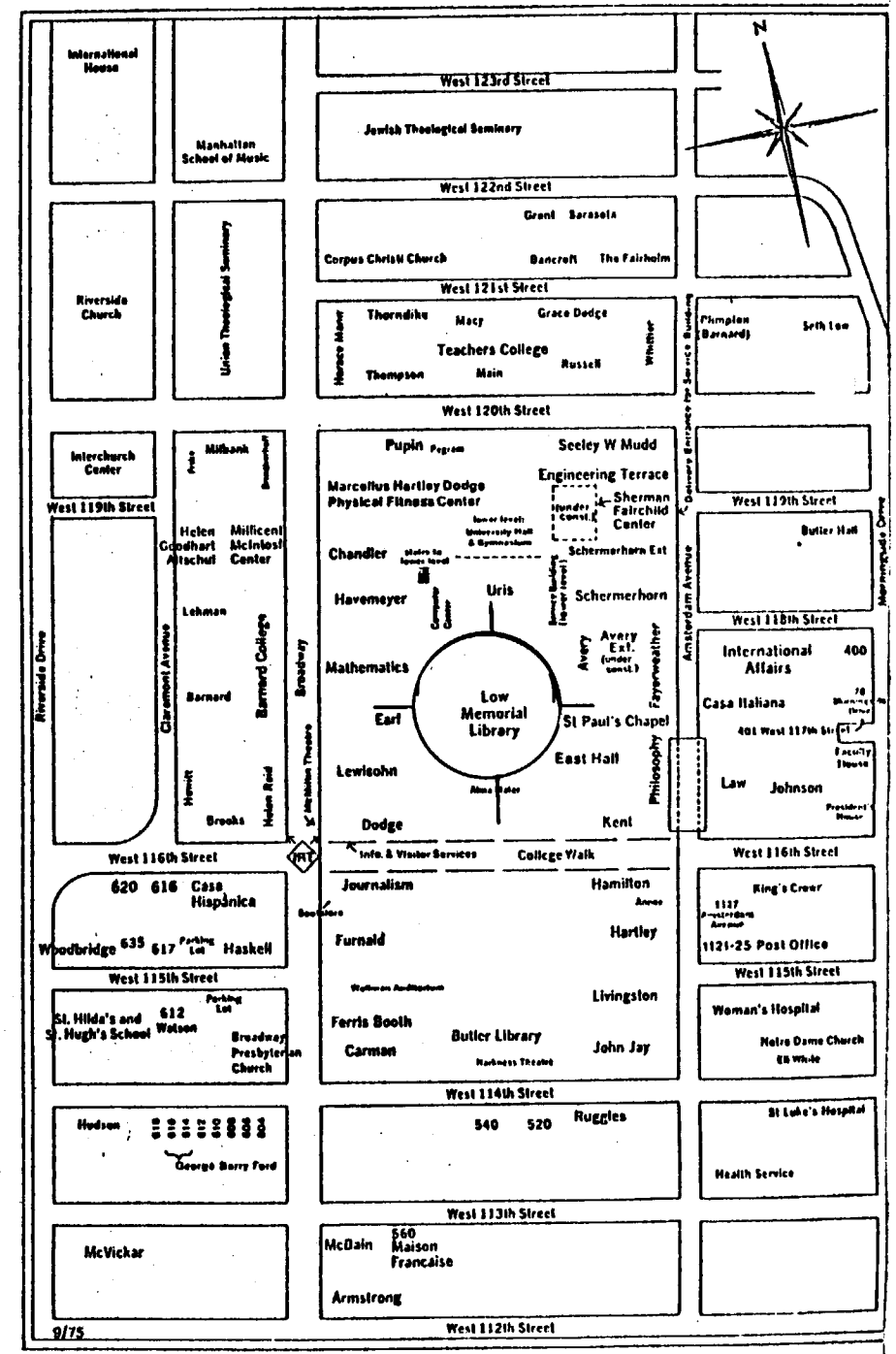


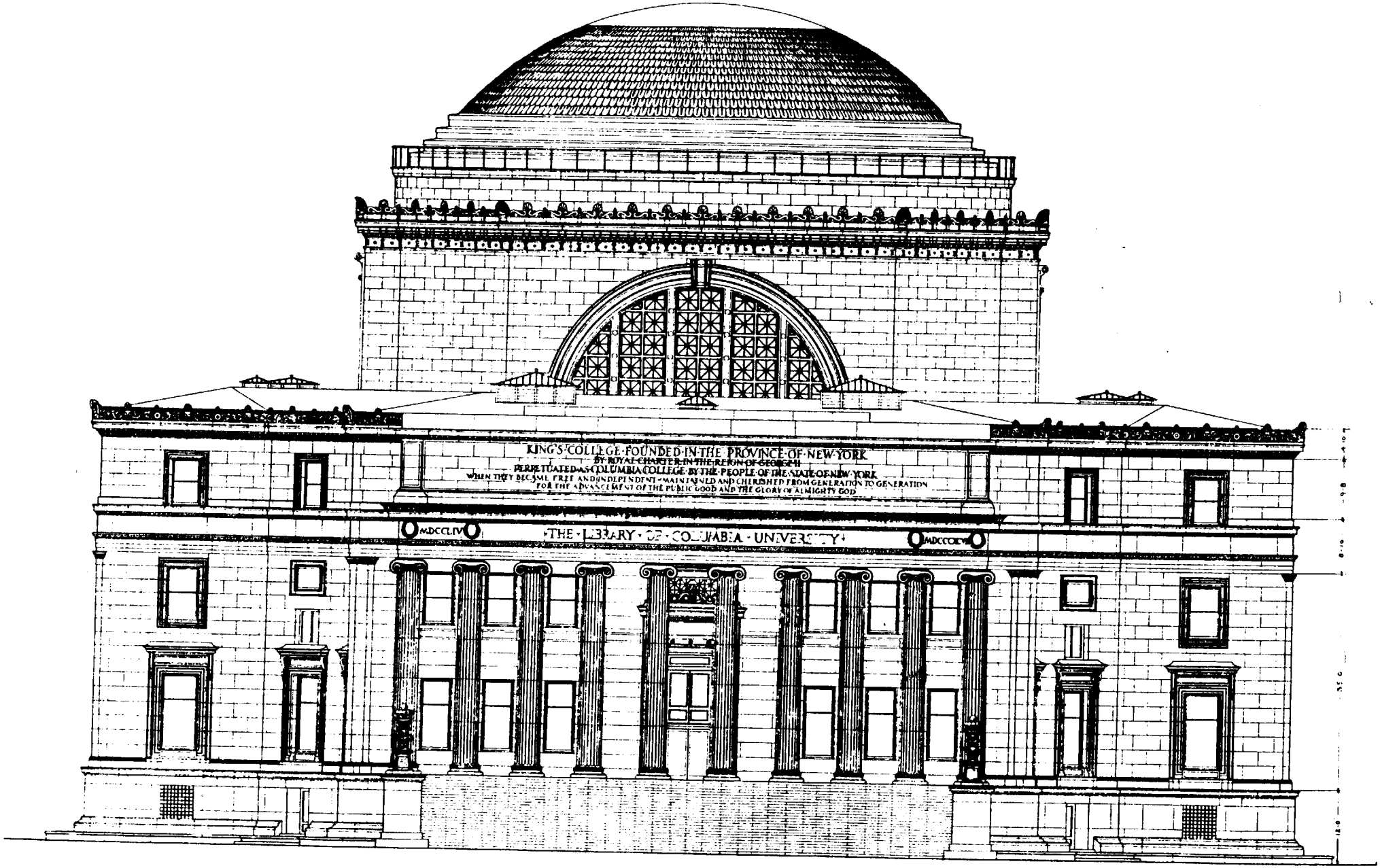
Low Memorial, Columbia University, New York City
Central Park Quadrangle
UTM References:
18/587 520/4517 770

The Morningside Heights Area of New York City



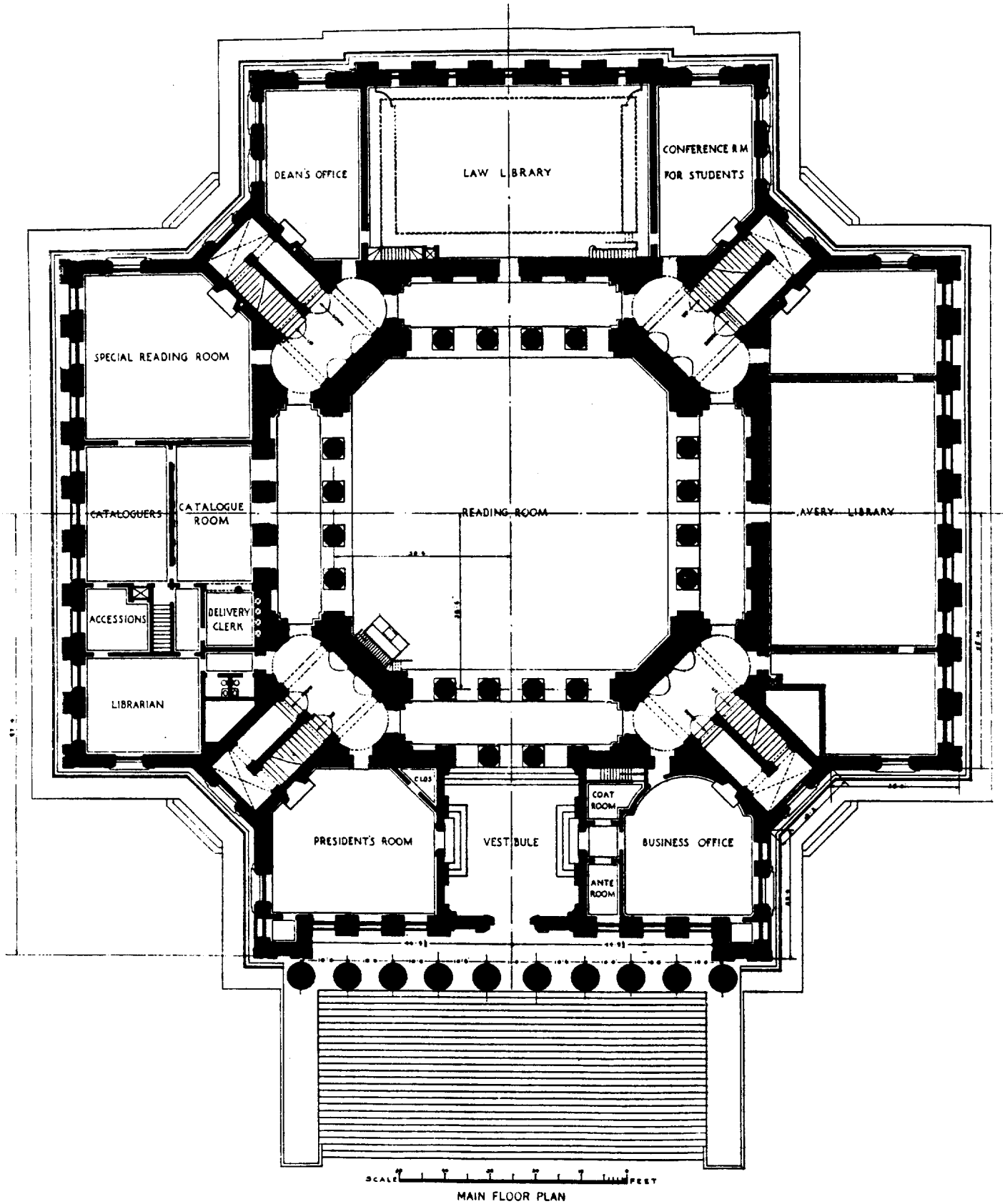
The Morningside Campus & Environs



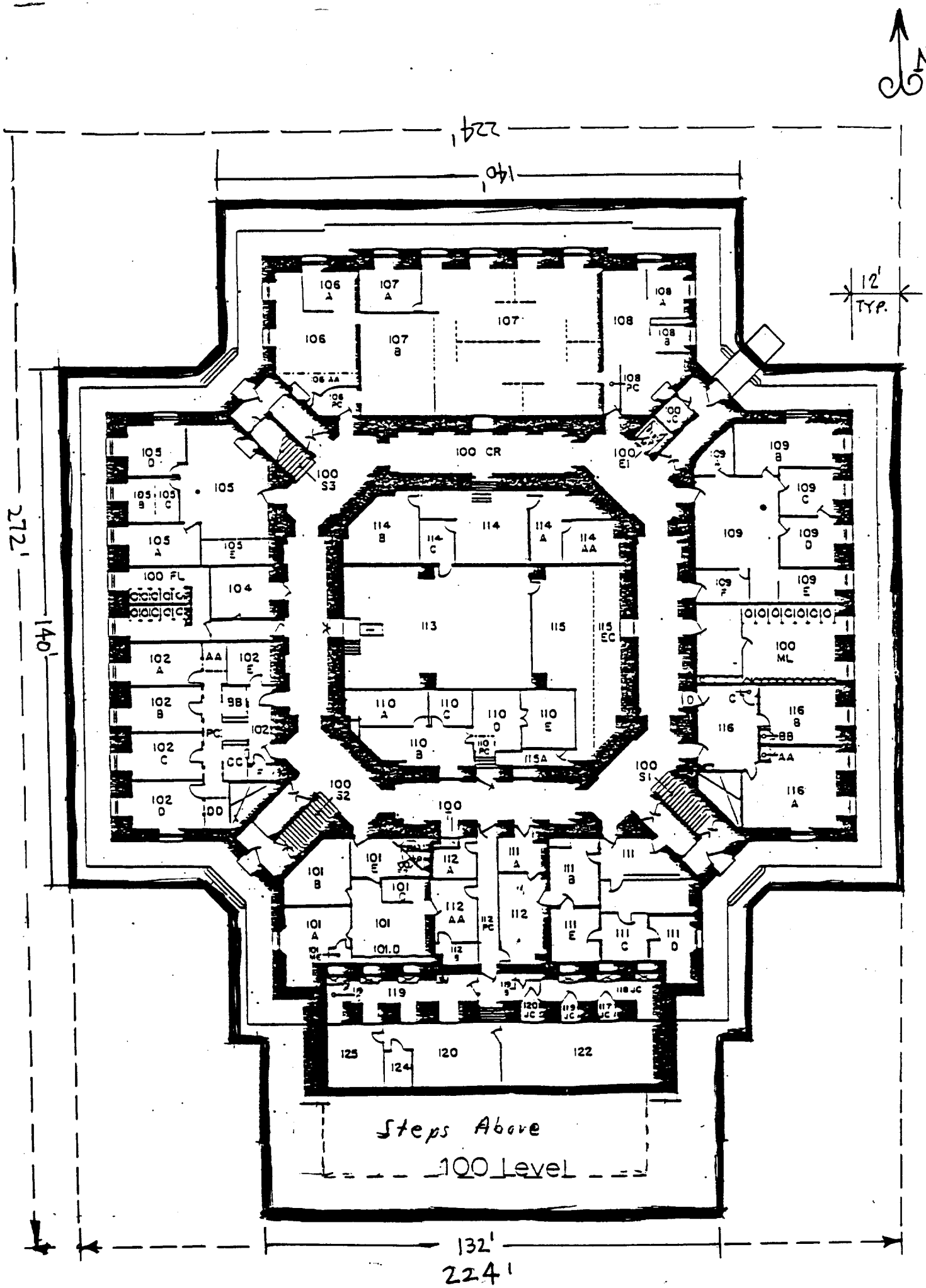


SOUTH ELEVATION

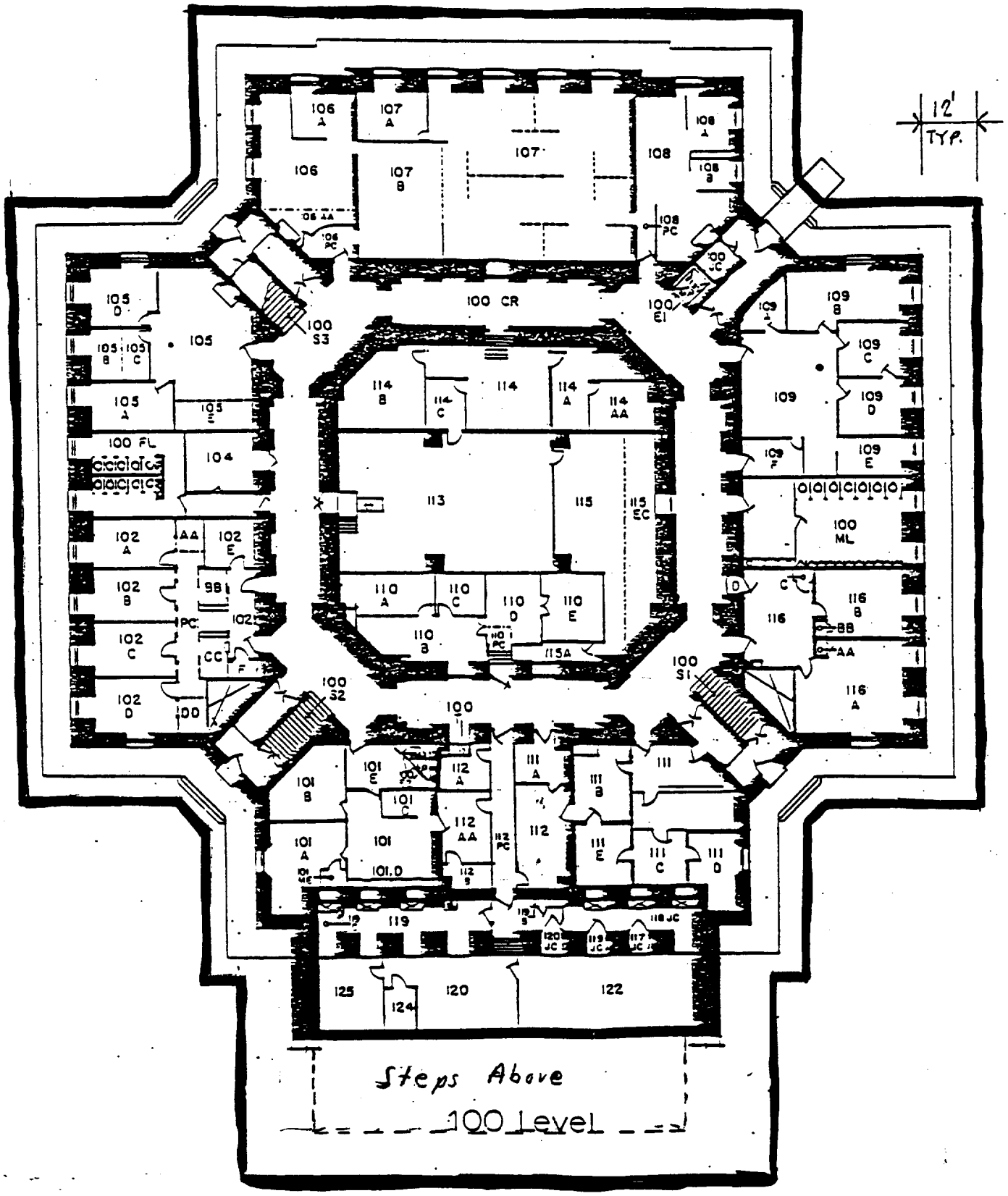
COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY LIBRARY, NEW YORK CITY.

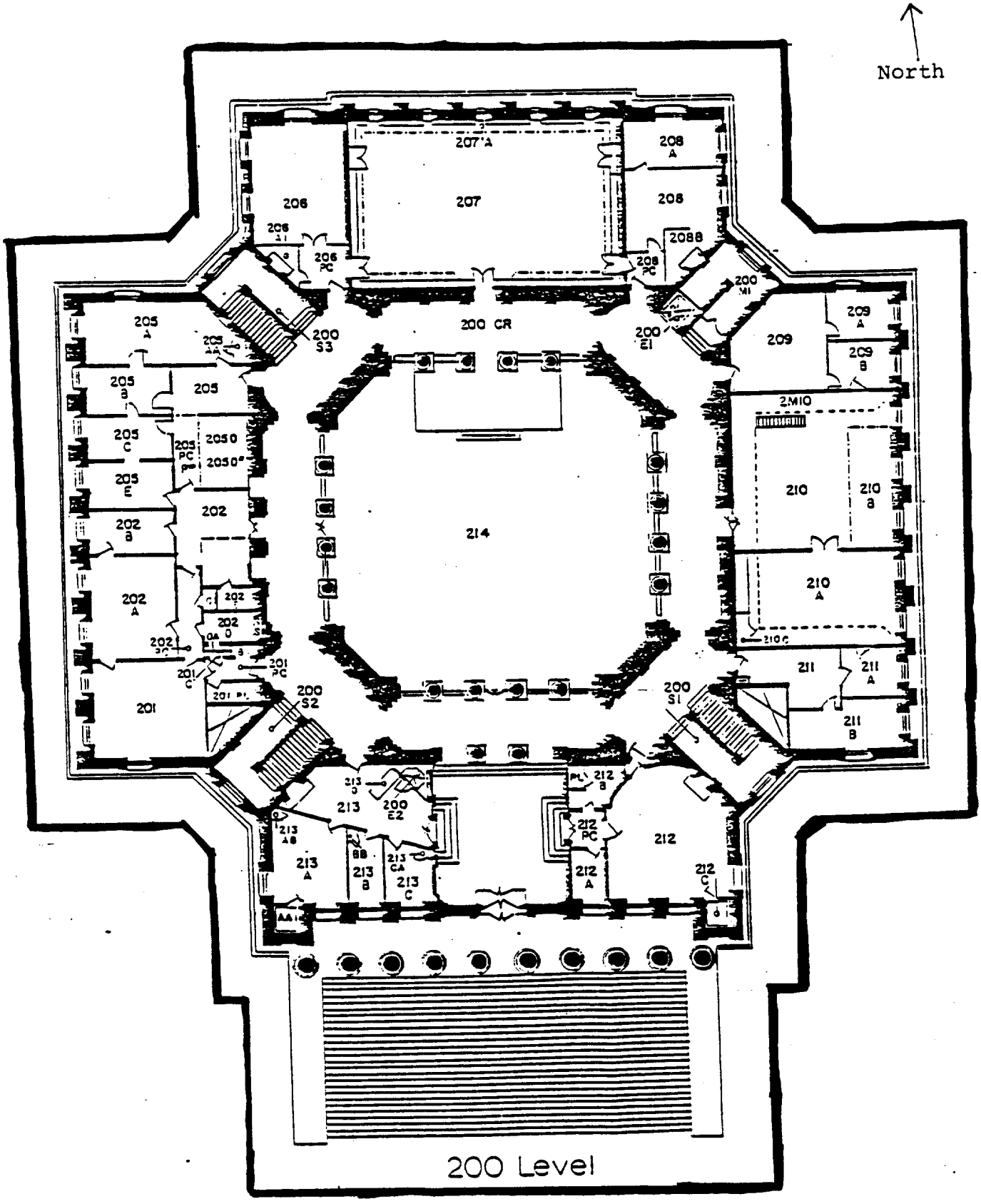


MAIN FLOOR PLAN


N
224'
140'
12'
TYP.
272'
140'
100 CR
100 S3
100 S2
100 S1
100 E1
100 FL
100 ML
Steps Above
100 Level
132'
224'

North


12' TYP.
106 A
107 A
107
108
106
107 B
108 A
108 B
106 AA
106 PC
108 PC
100 CC
105 D
105
105 B
105 C
105 A
105 E
100 CR
100 E1
100 S3
109 B
109 C
109
109 D
109 F
109 E
114 B
114 C
114
114 A
114 AA
100 FL
104
113
115
115 EC
100 ML
102 A
AA
102 E
102 B
98
102 C
PC
102
CC
F
102 D
DD
110 A
110 C
110 D
110 E
110 B
110 PC
115A
116
C
D
116 B
BB
AA
116 A
100 S2
100 S1
100
101 E
112 A
111 A
111 B
111
101 B
101 C
112 AA
112 PC
112
111 E
111 C
111 D
101 A
101
101.D
119
118 JC
120 JC
119 JC
117 JC
125
124
120
122
Steps Above
100 level


North
207'A
207
208 A
208
206
2088
206 PC
208 PC
200 M1
200 CR
200 E1
200 S3
209
209 A
209 B
205 A
205 B
205
205 C
205 PC
205D
205 E
202
202 B
214
2M10
210
210 B
210 A
202 A
202
202 D
201 PC
201 C
201
201 P1
200 S2
200 S1
211
211 A
211 B
213 D
213
200 E2
212 B
212 PC
212
213 AB
213 A
213 B
213 CA
213 C
212 A
212 C
AA1
200 Level